

The Urban Child. An Inter-ethnic Interdisciplinary Approach with Pasquale Culotta and Michele Canzoneri

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There is also somebody who educates,
without hiding the absurd that is in the world,
somebody who is open to any kind of progress
always trying to be honest to the other just like to himself,
dreaming of the others as they are not:
everybody grows up only if is dreamed of.

(Danilo Dolci)

Between January and February 2005 in Palermo, a special architectural laboratory took place, with a multi-ethnic group of teenagers from an Intercultural Aggregation Centre. The teaching activity of the lab was carried out by Pasquale Culotta in collaboration with the writer, availing to the invaluable artistic contribution of Michele Canzoneri.

This experience starts within the research implemented by Pasquale Culotta in the inter-ethnic city and developed listening to those potentialities that the project recognizes in the interaction and hybridization of cultures.¹ The coexistence of ethnic groups, which is both an ancient and modern condition for the city of Palermo, represents a reality rich in syncretisms and stratigraphies. On this «palimpsest» the possibility of a creative integration among cultures is seen by the project as the horizon of a possible contemporaneity.² These studies, which place the focus on the historical centre of Palermo, suggest to have established on the presence of numerous communities of different ethnicities, an original idea of «detailed plan» through which the spatial meanings of the characteristic morphology of the historical centre are confirmed without sacrificing the design of the new architecture.³

Focusing attention both on urban form and the house space, Culotta proposes an interpretation of the city based on the interaction between the spatial culture of the urban tradition of Palermo and the inhabiting cultures which in this case are engrafted through immigration. Therefore, the reflection of Culotta proposed looking at multi-ethnicity as a resource, as «further enrichment and opportunity».⁴

The urban reality of Palermo includes among its inhabitants more than eleven thousand people mostly from Mediterranean countries, Asia and Africa. Foreign residents, adapting themselves to the conditions found on site, act on housing processes throughout the complex network of behaviors, between continuity with their cultural roots and the approvals of the models in a globalized society. In this context many of public institutions and humanitarian associations play an important role, and have for a long time, been engaged in the activities of support, assistance, promotion of cultural and social integration of foreigners. Among these there are several Centres of Intercultural Aggregation which perform many educational activities for young people and work to promote the socio-cultural integration of immigrants' children.⁵ In the spring of 2004 one of these Centres, named «Mowgly», called for the participation of Culotta in the leisure activities scheduled for the following winter.

The idea of putting an architectural laboratory between the educational and recreational activities of the Mowgly Centre, therefore, originates from the cultural relations woven over the years by Culotta with representatives of foreign residents in Palermo. The involvement of Culotta has been considered by the Mowgly Centre as one of those undertakings aimed at the creation of a conscious and motivated sociability through a planning activity. This is a central aim for those who work at the Centre⁶ moreover, it also belongs in a specific way to the project of a human «dimension» for the inter-ethnic city of Palermo. Furthermore, presenting a way of going forward pragmatically with which we have attempted to interpret the educational needs of the architectural laboratory held at the Mowgly Centre, trying to convey to young people, in particular, the idea of transformation contained by architectural design.

A special performance as debut

The architectural lab addressed 12 students between the ages 11 and 17, whose families come from different countries: Bangladesh, Cote d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Ghana, Iran, Italy, Morocco, Mauritius, Nigeria, Pakistan, Tamil Nadu, Tunisia. The didactic trail was developed through various activities aimed at achieving a project:

1. Observation of the shapes.
2. Urban interpretation of the district and individuation of a deteriorated site to be replanned.

3. Project of modification.
4. Preparation of the materials.
5. Construction.

The project endeavoured to develop the didactic programme focusing on some of the major issues and on their joint discussion in progressive steps. However, it was understood that the first contact was critical to the success of the lab. Therefore, an interactive approach of a group game was used in which all participants were involved and was intended stimulate ideas about planning interpretations of the shapes.

The meeting space made available by the Centre, a school classroom, was scenically predisposed for this purpose, the thought behind this was that an unusual spatial arrangement would help to immediately stimulate the curiosity of young people involved. Thus, a large unopened, prismatic box of cardboard was placed as spatial fulcrum within a horseshoe figure formed by school desks. Along three walls a continuous strip of white paper was attached for drawing extemporaneous. The fourth wall remained free for projecting images, in order to ensure the collective view. The observation of the shapes came about through the discovery of the contents of the large box (60 x 60 cm) placed in the centre of the space. Immediately it captured the attention of young people. Upon entering, one of the students said, «...the magic box!»

As soon as all participants were seated around the horseshoe encircling this mysterious box, Pasquale Culotta started off the meeting by saying that we would see surprising things.

It kicked off the ritual opening. Once the box was opened it revealed inside nine small boxes (18 x 18 cm) all closed and of various colours, all waiting to be opened. One by one, the young students opened the nine boxes, uncovering one after the other from each of the images which were simultaneously projected on the wall.

The kind of proposed observation shifts the focus from shapes as such to their «features». In this sense, the growth stages of the butterfly — from the caterpillar to the adult insect — represent *the shapes which transform themselves*. In the same way, a pictorial work of Arcimboldo Arcimboldi as «Vertumno» shows *different shapes which compose other shapes* and also Escher's «Sky and Water» that echoes *the shapes which delimit other shapes*. The contents of the nine small boxes recalled some other familiar images, like a spiky chestnut shell with the smooth nut inside (in that there is *a shape which contains different shapes*) showing an interesting dialectic between external form and internal space. The bunch of grapes, on the other hand, represents *a shape composed by many equal shapes*, making explicit a way of

composing a shape with modular elements. Similarly were introduced the concept of plan and section and the off-scale (which has been called off-size). While the students unveiled the nine mysterious shapes, the strip of white paper on the walls was covered by the writer with various extemporaneous drawings representing other shapes with the same characteristics as those outputs from the boxes.

Finally, when all the boxes were opened, the enthusiastic reaction of the students promoted the facilitators to go one step further. Every student was asked to draw a shape and to describe its «features» according to the previous reasoning.

The work completed at the first meeting actually aroused a reciprocal interest between both students and teachers involved. As a result, the teaching strategy empirically selected those actions able to stimulate the individual motivation and to keep it during the group activities. In practice, the students' «replies» suggested the proper direction in order to keep their longing for discovery and their imagination alive.

At this point, it was necessary to relate the arguments previously made around the shapes with a prestigious architecture located within the district. It was therefore chosen to visit the Zisa⁷ building, which gives its name to the whole district.⁸

These experiences formed the basis for the following activity, the survey on the urban spaces of the district.

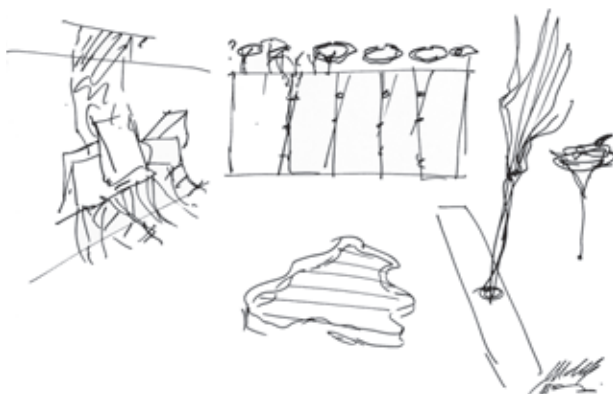
A new look on neighbourhood spaces

Le véritable voyage de découverte
ne consiste pas à chercher des nouveaux paysages,
mais à avoir de nouveaux yeux
(Marcel Proust)

The «discovery» of the meaning of the name of district, «Zisa»⁹ (*The beautiful, The splendid*), opened a series of surveys of some urban spaces which students, in day to day life, are used to live passively and without interest. The purpose of this activity focused on stimulating a new way of watching the already known spaces of the district so as a possible planned transformation could be drawn up. In carrying out the design exercise it was preferred to choose an urban space, renouncing to easiest way to work within the outdoor fenced area of the Mowgly headquarters. This is in order to believe that by acting directly on the public space would have emphasized the meaning of the transformation performed by us, between the subject's ability to shape the world in which it lives and the project feasibility.

In this way we tried to introduce a critical point of view compared to some ways of living which characterize the district, such as the widespread use of fences between buildings and streets, the occurrence of indefinite spaces devoid of quality or deteriorated, and the prevalence of the most appropriate spaces for cars than for inhabitants. Therefore, the observation of these presences and ways of living in the district highlighted the issues outlined in the planning research. Between all of the watched places the chosen site was a degraded and unqualified space near the headquarters of the Intercultural Centre, at the intersection of two public roads, via Perpignano and via Arcoleo.

The planning action had the task of turning it into a liveable urban space, an appropriate place to stop off and meet.



A sketch of Michele Canzoneri representing the idea of new urban space.

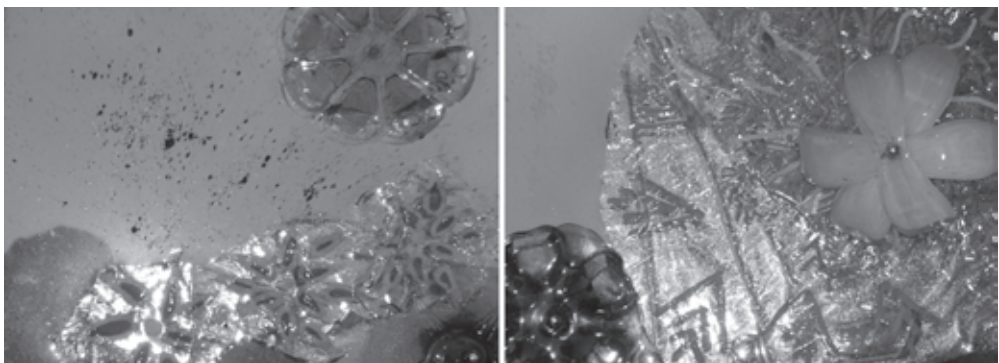
From design to realisation

The activities which started following the choice of site took advantage of the presence of Michele Canzoneri, called by Culotta to take part in the lab. He encouraged the young people to express a greater sensitivity to the materials and aesthetic relationships among the shapes.

In the joint discussion on the preliminary project, Culotta and Canzoneri circulated ideas and stimuli supporting the creativity of students with simplicity and intuition. The desires, come true in the form of an imagined space, were interwoven with the concrete realization of the materials useful to transform the site, within the unitary vision on the project. The laboratory itself became a sort of handcraft workshop where everyone brought into play his own manual skill. Thus, the preliminary draft of the new space began to take shape in the hands of guys.

The raw materials included distempers and acrylic colours, permanent markers, paper, plastic bottles, packaging material, plywood panels and other wood, metal for baking tins, pieces of billboards taken on the streets emulating the practice of Mimmo Rotella, as well as a small laurel tree and geraniums to be transplanted on the site. These were transformed by the students in the elements of the new space. Imagined as a small urban square this place is composed of fixed parts and floating elements:

- A large wall composed of modular panels painted with different subjects and put together in randomness, assembled on a brick fence with a spiked iron railing above. Here, the project transforms the offensive image given out by the pointed ends of the railing in the figurative pattern which crown the painted wall.
- Small containers of water, modular and low in shape, with mirrors inside them, positioned on the soil in front of the new urban wall. On the surface of water some colorful plastic water-lilies bloom.
- A large «kite» hung from a balcony and decorated with *décollage*, which draws the displacements of air in its dance.
- The new vegetation draws the boundary between pedestrian areas and roads.
- Two wooden chairs identify special points of view on the new space. The construction of the new «Mowgly square» (as renamed by the students) took place on February 23rd, 2005.



Water flowers made by the young people of Mowgly Centre for the pool of water in the new urban space.

The architectural lab as an input to the urban children

Palermo is now home to a large number of immigrants and, also thanks to the work of centres like Mowgly, various processes of cultural integration are in progress, in which the socio-pedagogical issues are pivotal. The teaching experience conducted at the side of Pasquale Culotta and Michael Canzoneri desired to contribute in these processes by conducting the young people through the planning of space. This kind of education can introduce an important awareness in the process of appropriation of the places in the city in a society composed of diverse ethnic groups. The activities of the laboratory carried out at the Mowgly Centre, based on the possible modification of the pre-existent, introduce on the one hand the idea of the «inhabitant» as maker, as the one who can decide to manage the places of his everyday life according to his needs and culture; on the other hand, the idea of the architecture as an instrument able to influence the relationship between the human and the city spaces, to encourage social interactions and improving the quality of life.



The faces of the young people of the Mowgly Centre and Pasquale Culotta (centre) reflecting in the pool of water during the construction of the new urban space

Notes

- * Emanuela Davi (Palermo, 1977) is an architect, Phd in Architectural and Urban Design, lecturer at the Faculty of Architecture in Palermo, participates in researches funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research. She deals in particular with newly founded towns and the relationship between architecture and city. She has published essays and articles and has participated in exhibitions, conferences and workshops both nationally and internationally. She currently lives and works in Palermo.
- 1. The research on the inter-ethnic city was mostly conducted through the teaching of the Laboratories of Architectural Design at the Faculty of Architecture in Palermo, between 1998 and 2003 years. Published in Pasquale Culotta, Andrea Sciascia, *L'architettura per la città interetnica. Abitazioni per stranieri nel centro storico di Palermo*, L'Epos, Palermo 2005.
- 2. Pasquale Culotta, «Migrazioni e traduzioni domestiche per la nuova architettura», in P. Culotta, A. Sciascia, *cited*, p. 41.
- 3. Within an unitary urban vision the research proposes a series of interventions, on different selected areas within the neighbourhoods Monte di Pietà, Papireto, Ballarò and Kalsa. The plans show a possible reconstruction in architectural shapes of the more degraded areas occupied by buildings that have little value or are unfit for use. The reconstruction is done through the building up new houses of which the ideals customers are the foreign residents. Through the design of single-family homes has been possible to highlight the meanings that bind a single architecture to the urban morphology. In the relationship with the foreign communities, listened in their needs, the research has given value to the role of cultural mediators as Sirus Nikkhoo and the reading of the places was enriched with the eye of the photographer Giovanni Chiaramonte.
- 4. Alexander Langer, *Il decalogo per la convivenza interetnica*, in Marianella Sclavi, *Arte di ascoltare e mondi possibili. Come si esce dalle cornici di cui siamo parte*, Le Vespe, Pescara-Milano, 2002, p.343.
- 5. The reception centres, assistance, training, language centres and recreational places are essential in the lives of foreign residents. These structures are needed to make the insertion of men, women, children and elderly from geographical and cultural contexts distant and different elevated socially.
- 6. Among these, it recalls in a special way Sirus Nikkhoo (architect and long-time intercultural mediator), Concetta Oliveri (in charge of the Mowgly Intercultural Aggregation Centre) and Martino Lo Cascio (coordinator «Mowgly» project).
- 7. The Zisa castle was built in the twelfth century as a summer residence for the royal family, during the reign of William I. The building stood outside the walls of Palermo, within the vast Genoardo's park, extended from the urban walls to below the hills of the Conca d'oro, which defines the geographical context and landscape of Palermo.
Over time, the building has undergone several changes and reconstructions. For more about the ancient city of Palermo see Cesare De Seta, Leonardo Di Mauro, Palermo, Laterza, Rome-Bari 1980. For more about the Zisa see Giuseppe Bellafiore, *La Zisa di Palermo*, Flaccovio, Palermo, 2008.
- 8. La Zisa was incorporated into the contemporary city and gives the name to the district that stretches between the historical centre (to the east), the beltway (to the west), via Pitrè (to the south) and via Perpignano (to the north). From the socio-cultural perspective, within this district, many ancient customs and traditions coexist at the side of contemporary ways of living.
- 9. The name «Zisa» comes from the Arabic *al-'Azîz*.